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A Food Policy Council Guide for Extension Professionals

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A Food Policy Council Guide for Extension Professionals

Abstract

Public interest in food systems and national prevention strategies focusing on cross-sectoral, community and systems level approaches paved the way for growing numbers of food policy councils. These councils function as organizations to discuss food-related problems, foster coordination across sectors, and influence food policies. Extension professionals can serve as "change agents," bring a wealth of experience and knowledge, form cross-sectoral collaborations, take leadership roles, and build community capacity through food policy councils. Based on expert interviews and our experiences in establishing a council, we present practice recommendations to serve as a concise how to guide for Extension professionals.

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Introduction

There is a growing interest in food systems (Broad Leib, 2012), which can be defined as the activities and regulations "involved in getting food from farm to table to disposal" (Neff, Palmer, McKenzie, & Lawrence, 2009). Food systems are interconnected to nutrition and public health issues such as access to healthy food and food insecurity (Hatfield, 2012). The importance of systems level, cross-sectoral approaches are evident in the national health promotion strategies and funding streams (e.g., Community Food Projects focusing on sustainable food systems) (Kumanyika, Parker, & Sim, 2010; National Prevention Health Promotion and Public Health Council, 2011; United States Department of Agriculture, 2011).

Until recently, food system-related issues have largely been addressed in isolation from one another by disparate government and nongovernmental organizations (Harper, Shattuck, Holt-Gimenez, Alkon, & Lambrick, 2009). In recent years, food policy councils (Councils), comprised of diverse stakeholders across food system sectors, have emerged as entities to provide a platform for collective planning and action. Councils typically identify and discuss food-related problems, brainstorm food system solutions, foster coordination across agencies and sectors, and evaluate and influence food policies. The number of Councils has been estimated to have nearly double between

2010 and 2013, going from 111 to more than 200 Councils (unpublished data obtained through personal communication, Winne, 2013).

Councils can serve as a medium for the sustainable Cooperative Extension (Extension) model, which involves a paradigm shift away from individual level "expert-models" toward collaborations with citizens and building community capacity (Colasanti, Wright, & Reau, 2009; Gillespie, Gantner, Craig, Dischner, & Lansing, 2003). Because the magnitude of publicly available information expanded over the years, the value of simply conveying the subject matter knowledge to public has declined. Instead, interpreting the information, stimulating collaboration and leadership, facilitating the use of collaborative knowledge and skills, and building community capacity are needed to address the food system issues (Gillespie et al., 2003; Raison, 2010; Thomson, Radhakrishna, & Bagdonis, 2011).

Extension can help address public health issues, support agriculture and economic development, and expand community assets through Councils. For example, Extension's expertise and resources are valuable for community assessments, strategic planning, and program or policy implementation, which are critical for the sustainability of Councils (Roberts, 2010). Because more rigorous evaluations of the processes, outcomes, and impacts of Councils are needed (Scherb, Palmer, Frattaroli, & Pollack, 2012), Extension's infrastructure and expertise can effectively meet these needs. Information dissemination, training, and engaging citizens from diverse backgrounds and various sectors of the food system also coincide with Extension's mission.

Both Extension professionals (Thomson et al., 2011) and communities (Perez & Howard, 2007) seem to be highly interested in the food system. However, previous work (Morton, 2002) suggests that Extension professionals feel less confident about being perceived as leaders in grass roots health-related policy development. Because Councils can take several forms and available information about best practices is limited, we examined the structures and experiences of a selection of Councils across the United States (US). We provide a summary of Council structures and practice recommendations to serve as a concise guide for Extension professionals. We also highlight how this information was used by Extension professionals and community collaborators to establish a local Council (New Brunswick Community Food Alliance [Food Alliance]).

Methods

Following a purposive, expert sampling strategy (Trochim, 2006), the project reported here involved semi-structured telephone interviews with representatives from the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) (Community Food Security Coalition, 2012) and Councils across the U.S. We first conducted a formative, online review of Councils. Then, we consulted with an expert from the CFSC, which was the organization following Councils at the time of the study. The CFSC expert helped with identifying the Councils. We selected six Councils as examples of city-level organizations that engaged their relevant communities. These Councils were located in the West, South (two in South Atlantic and one in East South Central), Northeast, and Midwest regions of the U.S.

A researcher (C.S.) conducted the interviews with one CFSC representative and six Council representatives between April and May 2011. The interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed by a study assistant (J.B.). Quality control for accuracy of the transcriptions, and the initial analyses and summaries were conducted by the project researcher (Salemi & Fitzgerald,

2011). One of the authors (N.F.) completed the thematic analyses (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Open-ended questions focused on the following themes: catalyst for establishing the Council; length of time to establish; relationship of Council to the local government; organizational and membership structures; mission and functions of the Council; processes used to engage communities; successes; and challenges. Information gained through the interviews was supplemented by a review of relevant documents (e.g., bylaws, progress reports) obtained from each Council. The study was approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board.

Gained information was discussed in open meetings by a group of Extension professionals and community stakeholders who collaborated to establish the Food Alliance. Residents; local business owners; representatives from local administration, university, schools, faith-based and civic organizations; emergency food service providers; and Extension professionals took part in the formation of the Council through a community participatory approach.

Formation of Food Policy Councils

Catalyst for Establishing the Food Policy Council

The interviewed Councils fell into three main categories: government-affiliated, grassroots, or hybrid (two councils in each). In the cases where local government was the catalyst of the formation (e.g., Mayor appointed a task force or the City Council passed a resolution), community activists and food system stakeholders were still actively involved in getting the government to take action. In other cases, local nonprofit organizations created the Council, and they remained independent from local government (Table 1). One representative pointed out,

We walked a fine line because on one level, we thought it was important to have the legitimacy of being appointed by the City Council would give us, but also understood that at times, we may have to be critical of the City and that we don't want to be controlled by the City government.

It was also pointed out that close affiliation or location within a government may lead to available staff or other resources, but this may now be less likely due to shrinking budgets.

For the Food Alliance, a hybrid model was selected by the community collaborators. A local nonprofit organization facilitated the community involvement, and collaboration with additional local stakeholders and Extension professionals maintained the forward progress. Local administration sent a representative to the planning meetings, formally recognized the Council through a resolution and held three voting member seats on the Council.

Table 1.
Location and Relationship of Food Policy Councils to Local Governments

Direct Affiliation	Grassroots	Hybrid
Directly affiliated with a local government through	Born out of the efforts of local nonprofit stakeholders; not	Authorized by a municipal ordinance but located within a

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • authorization; • appointment of Council members; or • allocation of funds and staff 	<p>formally a part of a local ordinance.</p> <p>Interact with local government through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advocacy • having available seats on the Council for government representatives 	<p>community-based organization.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal government recognition provides legitimacy in the eyes of community members or City officials. • Independence from the government allows the Council to play an adversarial role if needed.
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Length of Time to Establish the Food Policy Council

To pinpoint the beginning of the planning process was challenging for most of the interviewed Councils because of the pre-existing activities around food issues that helped the creation of a Council. One general estimate was that it takes 1 to 2 years of planning before a Council has its first official meeting. For some of the groups interviewed, it took up to 4 years. Extensive time spent on assessments, broader community engagement, or deliberations about bylaws lengthened the planning process for some. Others formed relatively quickly, either because they were appointed or began meeting without having solidified bylaws or membership requirements and conducted food system assessments after the Council was created. Formation of the Food Alliance took about 1.5 years.

Mission & Policy Focus

All of the interviewed Councils did have a general mission to improve the food system, but the degree to which each group worked on policy differed. Examples of policy-related objectives were to bring underrepresented communities to the food policy table, to advocate and support new or existing food policies, and to act as liaisons between food system stakeholders.

Determining a Council's relationship to policy appeared to be an important first step to guide decisions regarding structure, objectives, and membership composition. Indeed, the majority of the meetings and discussions during the formation phase of the Food Alliance were about the aims and structure of the Council.

Membership Composition and Selection

The number of seats on the interviewed Councils ranged from 15 to 21. A common characteristic was the aim to have a diverse membership across the food system sectors. Some Councils were more explicit and designated specific numbers of seats to various food sectors. For example, one Council reserved 12 seats for sectors such as sustainable agriculture, retail food stores, food distributors, farmers markets, nutrition and wellbeing, food industry workers, schools, emergency

food providers, and urban planning. In addition, six seats were reserved for at large members of the public, and three seats were appointed, one each by the Mayor, City Council, and Department of Health. Other Councils sought to have a diverse membership but allowed flexibility for membership composition to keep the seats filled at all times in the event that a representative from a sector is not available.

Table 3.
Ways that Food Policy Councils Select Their Voting Members

Self-selection	One Council initially allowed individuals who attended at least 50% of meetings to become a voting member. This generated committed members, but the loose structure of the Council was challenging. The group has since scaled back.
Appointment by government	Members were appointed by the Mayor with some input from the food system stakeholders. Appointments were delayed at times when the Council was not the priority of the administration.
Invitation by host organization	Used by one Council.
Recruitment-application-review	In one of the Councils, several members reviewed and scored the applications, and a committee made the final decision. Membership involved 1-, 2-, and 3-year terms to avoid turning the Council over at once. This was the most rigorous method to keep the Council diverse, balanced, and open to anyone with interest.
Hybrid	One Council used this method to have some seats appointed and others filled through application.

For the Food Alliance, a membership committee (including two Extension professionals) was formed to recruit, review, and select the initial voting members of the Council to ensure a diverse representation from food sectors. Community stakeholders who have been involved in the Council's planning process approved the initial voting members. After the confirmation, voting members became the final approval body for the future seats.

Staffing and Funding the Councils

The interviewed Councils relied primarily on grant funding from private and public sources. Two government-affiliated Councils received some funding for staff salary from local administration. One Council received a one-time start-up funding from the City, and another Council secured a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services for staff support. Despite the low probability of continuing funding through local municipalities because of budgetary issues, it was noted that some

government departments may co-sponsor initiatives that align with their work. For example, a county health department funded the community food assessments for one of the Councils.

A Council representative pointed out the need for not relying on any one source of funding to prevent undue influence. This Council aimed to have no more than 25% of its funding from any one source, but it proved to be difficult to do. The Councils that did not have dedicated staff expressed frustration but noted that it is possible to create a Council with dedicated, engaged stakeholders working on a voluntary basis.

In case of the Food Alliance, a 2-year federal planning grant (close to \$100,000) was obtained by Extension. Small grants, community resources (e.g., expertise, meeting space, student internships), and volunteerism helped maintain the functions of the Council during and after the initial grant period.

Ways Food Policy Councils Engage the Community

The methods used by the Councils (Figure 1) were consistent with that of Extension. Food Alliance adopted these strategies to keep the community members engaged. For example, regular community forums were held to inform and engage the residents, all planning meetings were open to the public, and, once established, Council meetings took place in the evenings. Content-specific workgroups (e.g., urban agriculture, healthy food access, economic development, policy, and advocacy) engaged the community members to drive the Council's actions. Extension faculty and staff contributed as workgroup members or leaders; took active roles in the planning, assessment, and evaluation tasks; and delivered informative or educational segments during the community forums.

Figure 1.

Ways Food Policy Councils Engage the Community

Gather public input	Community listening sessions help with the initiation and revision of the mission, objectives, and actions of the Council.
Structure Council meetings to encourage public participation	Hold meetings and special events outside the regular business hours; have open meetings; allow public comments at all meetings.
Work with a “sister” organization to gather public input	A “sister” organization with strong ties to the community works well for community outreach, complements the Council's work on policy changes, and builds community capacity.
Affiliate the Council within a community-based organization (CBO)	A CBO can house the Council permanently or temporarily. If the Council is located within government, a jointly funded CBO employee can staff the Council as a part of the job.
Structure the Council membership process to include the broader community	An application process, rather than appointment, helps ensure diversity and equal representation from the community.
Maintain a diverse membership composition, especially from underrepresented sectors	Some sectors may not be familiar with the role of a Council, have the capacity, or see the benefit of participating. A Council staff person or committee can monitor membership composition, build relationships and recruit members.
Facilitate turnover and development of new leadership	Place term limits on leadership; structure orientation, training and development opportunities for the community members to grow into leadership roles.
Engage the public in the tasks of the Council	Have workgroups that are focused on specific food system topics and that are open to community members who do not have seats on the Council.
Host special events or educational workshops	Events (e.g., food summits, workshops) in topics such as local/state government or Farm Bill educate the community and enable them to advocate for food-related policies.
Develop ways for youth to be involved	Youth can be involved in the Council by becoming members, participating in the workgroups or by forming a youth council.

Challenges

Lack of Funding

Funding is essential to hire a staff member. Locating a Council within government may allocate some

funding for council activities, but many cities are experiencing budget shortages. Most of the interviewed Councils relied on grants and gifts from foundations for their expenses.

Need for Staff Person or Leader

Because Council members serve on a voluntary basis, having a dedicated staff to convene meetings, manage initiatives, disseminate information, and conduct administrative functions is critical.

Keeping Members Engaged and Supported

Maintaining the interest and commitment of a diverse membership is a challenge. Determining members' expertise and resources, and using these assets were suggested as solutions.

Difficulty Filling Seats

Keeping member seats filled can be challenging, especially if there is not a pool of candidates such as at large seats with residents who are actively involved in food systems work. In an appointed membership system, seats may go unfilled if the council is not a priority of the administration or the relevant government position is temporarily or permanently empty.

Food Policy Council Formation 101 for Extension Professionals

Based on our and interviewed experts' experiences and reviewed documents, the following items emerged as useful practice recommendations.

1. **Recognize that the Council has the potential to function as a new public institution.** Structuring the council to promote democratic decision-making and empowering residents can have powerful implications beyond influencing policy.
2. **Work closely with local community-based organizations.** Create a mutually supportive environment as the formation of Council progresses.
3. **Identify a champion in the local administration.** If the Council is determined to be valuable and effective, the local administration is likely to be more supportive.
4. **Determine the goals and objectives of the Council and its relationship to policy.** Start by assessing the community's priorities and the group's capacity to evaluate and influence policy, to coordinate food system stakeholders, and to carry out initiatives. This will guide the structure of the Council. For instance, a Council focused on policy recommendations may be more effective with a small number of members who have policy expertise. A Council focused on creating awareness of food system issues may be more effective with a broader membership base. It is often good to begin with a small policy issue to feel successful and gain the confidence to go on to other policy issues.
5. **Gather public input and translate it into the mission, vision, goals, and functions of**

Council.

- Hold listening sessions to help with determining the food-related issues shared by community members and engaging community in the Council.
 - Elect an interim development committee to draft the initial recommendations for the structure, membership composition, and bylaws of the Council. Then, host one or more public listening sessions to invite feedback.
6. **Continue to move the formation of the Council forward while engaging community and gathering data.** The planning process can slow down the formation of the Council. There is no one-size-fits-all model for starting a Council. Determining the Council's goals and objectives will help clarify the process and help strike a balance between a long participatory process and efforts to move the Council forward.
 7. **Structure council activities (e.g., community food assessments) as community-engaged processes.** Conducting assessments can be a powerful tool for engaging residents. For instance, conducting a price survey of local stores opens up the possibility for Council members, residents, and Extension professionals to collaborate.
 8. **Develop process and outcome measures for a successful Council.** Process measures might include the numbers and diversity of people who attend meetings and remain active in the Council. Outcome measures may include an annual progress report that highlights which of the objectives have been addressed and whether or not the Council's recommendations were implemented by others.
 9. **After drafting membership criteria, use a recruitment and an open application strategy to determine membership.** This kind of strategy opens the Council to a diverse selection of individuals and helps attract enthusiastic and engaged applicants to volunteer.
 10. **Stagger initial voting members' term limits so that the entire Council does not renew at once.**
 11. **Diversify funding sources to help prevent undue influence.** If available, it is beneficial to earmark funds for a dedicated staff person who can assist with policy research and related issues.
 12. **Stay informed and research issues related to Councils.** As the Council movement grows, groups across the country will benefit from sharing their experiences and best practices. New research, resources, and information sharing through publications and conferences will help narrow the knowledge gap about the effectiveness and impact of Councils on the food system issues.

Conclusion

Public interest in food systems is growing, and cross-sectoral, systems level approaches are becoming more prominent strategies for health and wellness. Parallel to these changes nationwide,

food policy councils have emerged as entities to identify and discuss food system-related problems, brainstorm solutions, foster coordination across agencies and sectors, and evaluate and influence food policies.

Food policy councils are a new and expanding field of engagement for Extension. Extension professionals and their communities seem to be interested in food system topics such as local foods, food access, nutrition, agriculture-related businesses, and environmental impact (Perez & Howard, 2007; Thomson et al., 2011), but resources about Extension's involvement in Councils are limited.

Findings of the project reported here suggest that Councils function in a variety of forms, but funding, staffing, and keeping an active and diverse membership can be challenging. Despite these challenges, Councils can work effectively through motivated and engaged stakeholders and mutually beneficial collaborations between community stakeholders, including residents, local governments, nongovernmental organizations, and Extension.

Extension professionals have the expertise to serve as "change agents" and bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to Councils. In this role, Extension professionals can form cross-sectoral and community-level collaborations and take leadership roles in bringing the assessment, evaluation, implementation, and policy expertise into Councils. For example, food accessibility frameworks can be used by Extension educators for the actions of Councils (Mulangu & Clark, 2012). The infrastructure of Extension can help address local and state food systems issues and meet rigorous evaluation needs to document the impact.

One of the most important aspects of Extension's involvement in Councils is the potential for building sustainable community capacity, programming, and leadership. Extension professionals can achieve this potential by interpreting existing knowledge, engaging and building skills among stakeholders, and facilitating cross-sectoral collaborative planning and action. Extension's expertise areas such as agriculture, food production, nutrition, natural resources, program and economic development, and grant acquisition can be used to build capacity for sustainable progress in rural and urban communities. As pointed out by others, facilitating cross-sectoral collaborations supported by interconnected organizational resources (Sharp, Clark, Davis, Smith, & McCutcheon, 2011) may be the key to Extension's leading impact in resolving complex food system issues through food policy councils.

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